

drew the phantom along with him.

"No, Beni. You haven't yet. Thank you."

"Ramirez didn't."

"No. I agree," she said. "A lot don't. You're different to most. Ramirez was, both of you are, that curious blend of romantic and" – she said it very gently – "innocent. After something else."

Doesn't mean I won't though, he almost said, felt he should say it, a young man scared and confused. But didn't. "So what are we after then, Dormeuse?"

"Back to that, are we? Both wanting the same question answered."

"I'm afraid so." He continued walking, watching the scanner.

"All right. I allow you're motivated by the quest, by envy and reprisals against the past, the need both to have the past mysterious yet know it. I allow disenchantment, rites of passage, because it's there, all that. But we're generalizing. It doesn't tell me why you're here, does it? Why Beni is here as an individual."

Because I want to win, he could have said. Be up there among the greatest of them all: Ramirez, Calido, Asparan. But again didn't, feared sounding arrogant, brash, deluded like so many who came here. He *was* after something more. He was.

"You're being gentle with me, Dormeuse, so I'll try to find an answer. A real answer."

"Please do. And my name is Arasty. 'Dormeuse' means 'sleeping woman' in an ancient language. Which is what I am, just as you are ichneumon."

"I'm what?"

"Ichneumon. Another very old word. Means 'hunter' or 'tracker'. A small animal that used to hunt along river banks. Ate the eggs of crocodiles."

"Of what?"

"No matter. Beni and Arasty. We're here now and, yes, I'm being gentle because you are."

"But it's a mode as well. Tactical."

"Yes. It is." The black eyes glittered. "You could stop me?"

"I'm sure I can." Glittered.

"Yet the fact is you want us here."

"Oh, tell me why."

"Not yet."

"I'm curious. Tell me why."

"I need to concentrate."

For ahead, his cap-light's glow fell on something different at last, caught in strange verticals, made new shadows for his eyes and tech to fathom.

He had reached the peristyle hall.

Beni had expected it to be little more than a widening of the axial corridor, with the seven pillars on either side keeping the passageway's alignment from entrance-way to central tholos. But when he entered, he found it went back even deeper behind the smooth featureless columns than his stylized display suggested, just as the corridors were so very much longer than the plan showed. The walls shone with the same vitreous pallor as the corridor, but opposite each other in the centre of each back wall was the circular intaglio motif Ramirez had told him of.

The intercept appeared beside him while he stood

exploring one of the grooved mandalas with a finger.

"Know what that is?"

"Ramirez told me. It's a maze. The classic seven-ring design. The archetypal unicursal maze built round a cross and four points. Used by lots of ancient peoples, the Romans, the Cretans and Syrians, the Irish, the medieval Christians..."

"Yes, yes. So what is its significance? Did Ramirez tell you?"

Beni smiled. "A unicursal maze has a single path from the entrance to the centre. It looks complex but is really very direct."

"Why it appealed to the Tastans too."

"I'm sure."

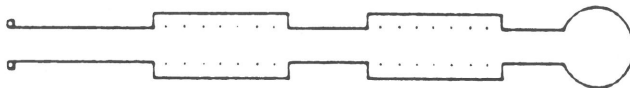
"Beni, I fear you're an optimist."

"What do you mean?"

"You see it as something complex being ultimately very simple. Like your comp reading there."

"So?"

"Why not a simple path made difficult. Look at your comp now." Beni glanced down, saw with a stab of alarm, panic, sudden terror, a new reading. He keyed randoms, saw only the new double-peristyle configuration.



"This does get interesting," she said. "Oh, by the way, 'ichneumon' also refers to a parasitic, hymenopterous insect that lays its eggs on another's larvae, using it as food for its own young as they hatch. Nice thought, yes? Little hunter." And she vanished.

Beni had been told this would probably happen, the host's hunt-mode surfacing, solicitous, caring, then cold, callous, vindictive, seeking to undermine any sense of hope.

He strode on, left the columned hall, plunged into the next length of corridor, just the tiniest dagger edge of doubt pushing through the confidence Ramirez had given him. What if there were a second peristyle hall? What if the tomb plan actually shifted, shunted him from one course to another, on and on? The mound was large enough.

Ramirez had spoken of it. It was a doubt he could still push aside. The tholos, the skull chamber, would be ahead. Not far.

The yellow cone pushing ahead became brighter, strengthening, whitening, as the host flashed in.

"Can we resume, Beni? You said that we want you here. Tell me why?"

Beni did not look at the intercept. He walked on, glancing at his display, then ahead, corridor, display, repeating that. He might have stayed silent, punished her for the trickery with the plan. But he sensed, just as Ramirez had told him, that it would probably be the worst thing to do. The tomb profiles liked to talk.

"It occurs to me, Arasty, that a sentry program

J.G. Ballard's comments on his own fiction

Arranged chronologically
by David Pringle

Seventeen of these comments come from *The Best of J. G. Ballard*, a 1977 paperback collection now long out of print (and likely to remain out of print). A further eight comments come from the similar French volume *Le livre d'or de la science-fiction*: J. G. Ballard (1980), and have not appeared in English before now. The remaining comments are taken from a variety of sources, including anthology and magazine appearances of stories, newspaper articles and interviews.

"Passport to Eternity" (written 1955, published June 1962)

Of my 92 stories, "Passport to Eternity" gave me the greatest pleasure to write. This may seem surprising, as it is the one story that stands apart from all the others – this is out-and-out wide-screen super-science, wringing every variant I could conceive from the repertory of interplanetary sf. In fact, the original draft was written well before the first science-fiction story of mine to be published. Just before I left the RAF in 1955 I tapped this out on a borrowed typewriter at RAF Booker, where cashiered aircrew sat around in underheated huts at a disused airfield. One of my regrets is that I have never written more stories like it.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (Futura, April 1977)

"Prima Belladonna" (December 1956)

"Prima Belladonna" is not only the first short story I wrote, but in many ways the best. The idea that I reached my peak with my first published story, and then went into a long decline, has a certain appeal to my sense of irony, and in a sense tallies exactly with the spirit of this story and the others collected under the title *Vermilion Sands*. For the chief characteristic of this desert resort, not abandoned but forever out of season, is that everything is over. Its past lies behind it, and nothing that can happen in the future will

substantially change it again. It has come to terms with its past, and now lies there on its deck-chair beside a drained swimming-pool, somewhere in the middle of this endless afternoon. It's against this background that chimeras stir, fancies take flight.

I always felt very much at home in Vermilion Sands, and over the past 25 years have made a number of return trips to it. In fact, if I had to make a guess I would say that Vermilion Sands is what the future will be like, a place where work will be the ultimate play, and play the ultimate work. It's a place where nothing happens but everything is possible, and where the contents of the psyche pass freely through the barrier of the skull and take up residence at the bottom of the garden, to be cared for in that off-hand way in which the hero of "Prima Belladonna" cares for his singing flowers. And of course, nothing is so likely to attract the attention of the nearest off-duty witch than a well-stocked psychic garden.

Where is Vermilion Sands? Somewhere, I suppose, between Palm Springs, Juan Les Pins and Ipanema Beach. Vermilion Sands is very much

a beach resort, but needless to say there is no sea. The beach extends continuously, in all directions, merging with the beaches of its neighbouring resorts, extensions of the afternoon minds of its inhabitants. I look forward more and more to going back to Vermilion Sands, and this time staying forever.

– From *First Voyages* ed. Damon Knight, Martin H. Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander (Avon, May 1981)

"Escapement" (December 1956)

This was my first science-fiction short story to be published in *New Worlds*, more than 20 years ago. Here conflicting temporal systems clash together and destroy themselves, as in an asylum where voracious clocks devour each other. Without any intention on my part, the story also presents a more or less faithful picture of the first year of my marriage.

– From *Le livre d'or de la science-fiction*: J. G. Ballard (1980; back-translated from Robert Louit's French by DP)

"The Concentration City"

(originally published as "Build-Up," January 1957)

"The Concentration City" was published in 1957, the year of Sputnik 1, and the dawn of the Space Age. Remembering the shiver of excitement that went through everyone then – far greater than anything we later felt even during Armstrong's landing on the Moon – it must have